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What Reagan Knew, and When

Contrary to what the members of the Tower Commission and almost everyone have said, Ronald Reagan does not emerge from the pages of the commission's report as a confused old man who had only the foggiest notion about the secret arms deal with Iran, which his own National Security Council staff had been pursuing for well over a year.

It is true that the Tower Commission uncovered no evidence that the president knew about the diversion to the contras of profits from the Iranian arms sales. But a careful reading of the report establishes three points that together refute the idea that Reagan suffered from any serious confusion about the arms sales themselves.

To begin with, it becomes clear from the evidence supplied by the report that the first shipment of arms to Iran, made by the Israelis, went forward only after Reagan had given his approval (even though he now claims that he cannot remember exactly when he gave it). Then about five months later, Reagan authorized the first direct supply of arms to Iran by the United States. On Jan. 17, 1986, he wrote in his diary: "I agreed to sell TOWs to Iran."

So much for the question of who was responsible for selling arms to Iran. Ronald Reagan was responsible.

But (moving on to the second point) did Reagan understand what adopting such a policy meant? Not in the opinion of John Tower and his two colleagues on the commission, Brent Scowcroft and Edmund Muskie. They have charged that the president was never properly briefed by his advisers about the risks to the nation and to his own political fortunes entailed by the arms sales. As Scowcroft has put it: "There should have been bells ringing, lights flashing and so on."

Yet what we learn from evidence contained in the report itself is that bells did ring and lights did flash. Both Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger were against the arms sales, and on several occasions explained why in no uncertain terms.

At one meeting in the Oval Office, for example, Shultz "stated all of the reasons why I felt it was a bad idea. . . . I didn't just sort of rattle these arguments off. I was intense. . . . The president was well aware of my views."

Weinberger was equally vehement in denouncing the policy. At an earlier meeting with the president he "opposed it very strongly" as "a terrible idea," and Shultz backed him up. So persuasively and forcefully did they present their case that they thought they had "strangled the baby in the cradle." No such luck. The president decided against them.

He arrived at this decision, according to Attorney General Edwin Meese's testimony, with "an adequate understanding of the argument for and against the project." This view has been confirmed by Robert C. McFarlane, who was national security adviser when the policy was originally being

considered. The president, McFarlane has testified, "called and said: I think we ought to get on with that . . . and I said do you understand, of course, now that George [Shultz] and Cap [Weinberger] are very much opposed to this and they have very good reasons? . . . and he said: Yes, I understand how they feel, but I want to go ahead with this."

Finally, in this same conversation with McFarlane, Reagan left no doubt that he was also fully conscious of the political embarrassment he would suffer if (or rather, as Shultz later told him, not if but when) the policy became public knowledge. McFarlane remembered the president saying that he would "be glad to take all the heat. . . ."

The director of the CIA, William J. Casey, came away with exactly the same impression from another meeting in the Oval Office: "I suspect he would be willing . . . to take the heat in the future," Casey noted in a memo, if this will lead to springing the hostages.

If this will lead to springing the hostages. There we have it, and on this issue of the president's motives, at least, the conclusion reached by Tower and his colleagues is fully consistent with what their evidence shows.

The overriding reason Ronald Reagan sold arms to the Khomeini regime was that he wanted to free the American hostages who were being held in Lebanon by terrorists under Iranian control. In doing so, he violated his own declared policy against selling arms to Iran, as well as his own declared policy against paying ransom for hostages. He thereby provided an incentive for more hostage-taking in the future and severely damaged the antiterrorist cause in general.

In all this, Reagan was abetted by the Israelis and their expert in counterterrorism whose expertise seemed to consist in figuring out new ways of paying terrorists off. Here the Tower report tragically confirms what had already been suggested by Israeli behavior in two earlier hostage crises—that Israel can no longer be counted upon to set an example for the rest of the world on how to deal firmly with terrorism.

And what of all the talk about encouraging "moderate" elements in Iran and countering a future Soviet threat? Some of the players in this squalid drama were obviously moved by such strategic fantasies. But as McFarlane has finally confessed, the main function of this geopolitical rationale was to "gild the president's motives," which were focused from beginning to end on the hostages.

Thirteen years ago, during the Watergate hearings, it was, ironically, Reagan's new chief of staff, Howard Baker, who kept asking two famous questions: What did the president know and when did he know it? If we asked these questions about Reagan's relation to the selling of arms to Iran, the answers we get from the evidence collected by the Tower Commission are: more than enough, and from the very first minute.

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